

4. THE CURATORIAL ROLE

The inspection process yields an array of technical data as well as physical clues to a film's date and past use, but how do the bits of evidence add up? What do the details tell about the film's original purpose and reception? Does the film provide a window into subjects, cultures, and historical periods documented by your institution? How does the film contribute to your collection?¹

This chapter discusses additional types of information, beyond the physical evidence in the film itself (discussed in chapter 3), that help in identifying motion pictures and evaluating their historical and cultural importance. From these sources the subject specialist builds an understanding of the film's significance. The last piece in the puzzle is the assessment of uniqueness—whether the film represents the best surviving source material on which to base future preservation copies.

4.1 THE PAPER TRAIL

Usually the first step in contextualizing your film takes you to materials within your own institution.

INSTITUTIONAL RECORDS. Virtually every library, archive, and museum now keeps records on materials accessioned into its collections. Depending on local practices, these files may include correspondence with donors or sellers, appraisals, inventories, published brochures or articles, and curatorial notes. The information may also vary with the age of the record. At the very least the records give the acquisition particulars and mention colleagues—both active and retired—who were involved in the transmittal.

Preservationists should not forget the artifact itself. Often the cans, labels, and notes stored in the original film container contain useful documentation. (For more on this type of evidence, see 3.3.)

FILMS IN MULTIMEDIA COLLECTIONS. For films acquired as part of collections of personal papers or organizational records, your institution may have rich documentation buried in the collection itself. Correspondence and diaries may illuminate how and why amateur films were made—either through specific reference to their creation or by amplification of events depicted in them. For films that are part of

1. The primary published source consulted for this chapter was Stephen G. Nichols and Abby Smith, *The Evidence in Hand: Report of the Task Force on the Artifact in Library Collections* (Washington, D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2001), particularly "The Artifact in Question," 8–16. Also available at www.clir.org/pubs/abstract/pub103abst.html.

organizational records or archival record groups, there is sometimes even more contextual material—scripts, in-house newsletters, memos, photographs, artwork, financial records, and distribution logs. Records from film-producing organizations can be a treasure trove.

ORAL HISTORY. For newer accessions, past owners or their heirs are often the best resource. A telephone call or e-mail message may stimulate discussion or result in an invitation. For visits and interviews, some specialists recommend bringing a videotape copy and encouraging the contact to identify people and places. The interviewee may also share photographs or other artifacts. Every interview has the potential to point to other useful sources.

4.2 PUBLISHED SOURCES

Learning more about your motion picture may also require library research. Books, articles, and Web sites about the filmmaker and the depicted subjects, events, and places can provide outside validation of your film's significance as a historical document. The bond issue promoted by *This Is Your City* (the political ad profiled in the case study in chapter 1) was covered in detail in Oklahoma City newspapers and chamber of commerce records. Contemporary accounts suggest how the film fit within the overall campaign.

Publicly exhibited motion pictures are often discussed in published reviews or articles. Cinema historians have long combed the American entertainment trade papers for reviews of silent-era fiction films. In addition to their critique, these pieces often include credits, original running time, and production information. Regionally produced and exhibited films had their own media following. *Kearney and Its People in Motion Pictures*, the 1926 portrait of a Nebraska railway town held by the Nebraska State Historical Society, was described with pride in Kearney's *Daily Hub* twice during the year of production.

Political ads, industrial films, public service announcements, educational documentaries—any published film targeting a specific audience may be covered in publications read by those viewers or issued by the group making the film. Trade journals such as *Business Screen Magazine* and *Educational Screen* are excellent resources for information on defunct production companies and are full of leads to individuals who may have participated in the making of films. Reference books like *Educational Film Guide* (no longer published) contain credits, synopses, and other information on a surprising variety of nontheatrical titles.²

It also may be useful to consult the records of the U.S. Copyright Office at the Library of Congress. Many commercial releases, from Hollywood features to edu-

2. *Business Screen Magazine* appears to have begun in the 1940s and continued publication for several decades. *Educational Screen* was a monthly published between 1922 and 1956. *Educational Film Guide* was issued irregularly by the H.W. Wilson Company from 1936 to 1962.

cational films, were registered for protection under federal copyright law. With the application, claimants sometimes included scripts, scenarios, and other production materials. These files are available through the Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division and accessed by the registration numbers listed in the published copyright catalogs.

4.3 RECOGNIZING VALUE IN THE COMMONPLACE

Films capturing a different voice or point of view can have significance that transcends their simple origins. They may document communities not usually depicted in the mainstream media or show traditions or events that only a participant could film.³

This is why some amateur films can be such telling historical documents. Rev. Sensho Sasaki, for example, filmed everyday activities in the West Coast Japanese American communities in the late 1920s and early 1930s. These are ordinary enough home movies, but history has a way of adding value to the commonplace. Today it is not possible to view Sasaki's films, now in the collection of the Japanese American National Museum, without seeing them as a time capsule of communities soon to be uprooted by forced incarceration during World War II.⁴

For the subject specialist, it can be challenging to identify the culturally significant among the many home movies and television news films offered to regional collections. In the end, the specialist makes the assessment by factoring in institutional collecting interests as well as the film's age, technical quality, subject matter, and point of view.

It is important to articulate these collecting interests in a written acquisitions policy. Most repositories already have written policy statements defining the subject areas, geographic regions, and time periods in which they acquire materials. These documents link acquisitions to institutional mission and clarify collecting goals across various departments. Be sure film is included in these documents. This will both acknowledge its role and help guide future selection decisions.

4.4 DOES YOUR INSTITUTION HAVE THE "BEST" SURVIVING SOURCE MATERIAL?

Once the historical value of your film is established, the last piece in the puzzle is the assessment of uniqueness. With this question, the discussion moves from your institution to the national and international perspective.

3. For more on the significance of home movies, see Patricia R. Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).

4. See *Program Notes*, in *Treasures from American Film Archives: 50 Preserved Films* (San Francisco: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2000), 77.

Motion pictures, by their very nature, may exist in multiple prints and negatives. Other museums, archives, and libraries may own copies, as might collectors and commercial archives. How can you tell if your institution’s material is the “best” and worth using in future preservation work?

As with so many curatorial matters, this determination is based more on judgment than on formula. Among the factors to consider are (1) number of copies known to exist in other collections, (2) number of generations of your film from the camera original, (3) completeness of your copy (gauged by accounts of the film’s original length), and (4) its physical condition.

With films acquired directly from professional filmmakers or filmmaking organizations, this is generally an easy call. A and B rolls, magnetic sound tracks, and negatives are elements used in film production. Unless damaged or incomplete, these sources are the most authoritative records. Motion pictures received directly from an amateur filmmaker or the filmmaker’s heirs are also likely to be “best” copies.

Another fairly straightforward case is the 8mm, Super 8mm, and 16mm reversal original. These films are unique objects.⁵ Artist films with color or scratching added by hand present a similar situation.

Things become less clear-cut, however, with prints. As a rule of thumb, the smaller and more specialized the film’s target audience, the fewer the number of prints that were made. With fewer prints, the likelihood is greater that your institution has research materials not duplicated elsewhere. But subject matter, source, and common sense also come into play.

Take, for example, 8mm or 16mm sound copies of Hollywood cartoons, shorts, and features. These prints were mass-produced for home and institutional markets, and it is highly probable that commercial collections own better-quality 35mm copies of most titles.⁶ For silent-era films, however, the equation changes. With some 75% of American silent feature production thought to be lost, a vintage reduction print could be a valuable source. For such prints, it is worth calling an archive specializing in silent film or checking the silent film database of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP).⁷

For motion pictures created for a specialized audience and not widely circulated, the research can be accomplished in several steps. A few strategic calls or visits to organizations collecting in the subject area or affiliated with the filmmaker can

5. In some cases, particularly in that of avant-garde films originally created on reversal stock, duplicate copies were later printed on reversal stock. Often duplicates have two sets of edge codes—one for the original and the other for the copy.

6. One area of exception can be low-budget or independent films, particularly ones from companies that have gone out of business. In some cases 16mm sound copies are all that survive of B-Westerns or films made for African American audiences.

7. This is published as part of the annually updated *FIAP International Film Archive Database* and is available on CD-ROM from Ovid (formerly SilverPlatter), www.ovid.com. As of 2003, FIAP’s silent film database included records for 37,000 titles.

verify if other copies are thought to exist. Searching for a better copy of its 16mm *Airplanes at Play*, made by the young Charles Stark Draper in the early 1930s to raise seed money for aeronautical research, the MIT Museum located 35mm source material at the celebrated engineer's own laboratory.

Government-made films are a special case. Because the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) retains copies of federally produced films, it is probable that prints in nonfederal collections replicate materials already in NARA custody. Many state and local governments also produce films, but archiving practices vary with jurisdiction. Research on prints of state and local government productions generally requires more legwork.

Nationally distributed 16mm industrial films, educational documentaries, public service announcements, and training films are the most difficult to research. Hundreds of prints may have been created for schools, military bases, businesses, clubs, and churches. Yet for some titles few copies may survive. It requires a good deal of research to find out if you have the best surviving print of a 16mm industrial or educational film.

When checking for other copies, there are many paths to explore. Often the best place to begin is the online catalog of the Library of Congress, which includes records for much of the Library's motion picture holdings. Another useful Internet source is the Prelinger Archives, which provides access to viewable copies of almost 2,000 advertising, educational, and industrial films.⁸ Also worth checking are the bibliographic utilities OCLC and RLIN for the film records contributed by universities, archives, and museums (see 7.4). Lastly, there is *Footage*, an international directory describing 1,860 collections of moving image materials in North America alone.⁹ Designed for stock footage researchers, this reference work covers many little-known repositories and includes an extensive subject index through which you can identify organizations likely to hold similar materials.

Preservationists are increasingly turning to colleagues for help through professional listservs. The Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), the American Library Association, and the Society of American Archivists (SAA) host community discussion groups through which professionals can post queries and receive responses from the field.¹⁰ Specialized subject listservs are also a resource.

8. Accessible at www.archive.org/movies. Founded by Rick Prelinger, the Prelinger Archives includes more than 48,000 advertising, educational, industrial, and amateur films. It was acquired in 2002 by the Library of Congress.

9. The directory includes 3,000 collections from around the world. See *Footage: The Worldwide Moving Image Sourcebook* (New York: Second Line Search, 1997).

10. Information on film and archival practices is regularly exchanged on AMIA-L: An Online Forum for Moving Image Archivists, www.amianet.org/amial/amial.html; the H-Film Discussion Group, www.h-net.org/~film; the SAA Archives and Archivists Listserv, www.archivists.org/listservs/index.asp#archives-archivists; and the SAA Visual Materials Section's Cataloging and Access Roundtable List, www.lib.lsu.edu/SAA/vmelist.html.

For some types of films, however, even extensive searching in national databases and calls to colleagues will not yield a definitive answer, and the specialist can never be 100% sure that a print represents the best surviving source material. Thus for the film-to-film preservation described in chapter 5, preservationists recommend putting at the head of the queue items known to be unique, rare, and historically significant.

TABLE 6. ASSESSING THE UNIQUENESS OF FILM MATERIALS: SUMMARY

Film Material or Type	Does Your Institution Have the “Best” Surviving Source Material?
Production element (A and B rolls, interpositive,* negative, or magnetic track)	Probably yes, if materials are complete and in good physical condition.
Reversal original	Probably yes, if materials are complete and in good physical condition.
Hand-colored artist print	Probably yes, although similar copies may exist.
Amateur film or home movie	Probably yes, if material is reversal original. If a print, check institutional records and contact filmmaker or heirs.
Reduction print** of Hollywood feature or short	If 8mm, no. If 16mm sound print, probably not. If 28mm or 16mm print of a silent film, perhaps. More research required.
Print of federal government film	Probably not.
Print of film produced by state or local government	Perhaps. Likelihood increases if 35mm print. More research required.
Print of specialized-subject film with limited circulation	Perhaps. Likelihood increases if 35mm print. More research required.
Print of regionally produced film with limited distribution	Perhaps. Likelihood increases if 35mm print. More research required.
Print of nationally distributed educational or industrial film	Unlikely. Difficult to document. More research required.

*An interpositive is a color production or preservation element made from a negative original and then used to create a duplicate negative from which many prints can be generated. An interpositive is not intended for projection.

**A reduction print is a positive made in a smaller format than the original.

CASE STUDY: UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS

Will Rogers and Wiley Post (1935, 650 ft., 16mm, black and white, silent), preserved by the Alaska Film Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

In identifying film there is no substitute for a good curatorial eye. The story of how the Alaska Film Archives unraveled the mystery of two unidentified films transferred from the Fairbanks North Star Borough Library is a case in point.



Celebrated humorist Will Rogers on August 15, 1935, shortly before his air crash.

Usually archives rely on accession records to establish a film's source and history. For this acquisition, however, the university had little information. All that was known was that the two films had been held by the public library and had survived two floods. This was borne out by the condition of the cans, which were rusted and had to be pried apart. Inside were 16mm reversal originals tightly wound on their original reels. Before starting inspection, the curator let the films acclimate and carefully rewound them onto larger-diameter cores, adding new leader at the head and tail.

A good deal can be learned about a film by examining it closely. The first clue is the code on the edge of the film stock, which tells where and when the film was manufactured. Checking the edge code against a Kodak chart (see appendix A) established that the film was shot in 1935 or after. The condition of the reversal print was the next bit of evidence. The original was battered—broken perforations, bad splices, and abrasions—and appeared to have been frequently projected. What could have so interested audiences? Before putting the film on a viewer, however, the curator checked shrinkage with a homemade measuring tool. The shrinkage appeared slightly under 1% and within the tolerance of the equipment.

Little did the curator expect to find among the images humorist Will Rogers visiting with friends at the Pacific Alaska Airways hangar at Weeks Field in Fairbanks. Piecing together the edge code date, film condition, locations shown in the shots, and other visual evidence, the curator determined that he was examining the last known moving images of Rogers and his friend Wiley Post before the air crash that took their lives on August 15, 1935.

The university received a grant to preserve the film and make VHS tape copies available to the public. This historically important footage is now safely housed in the archive's film vault at 40°F and 35% relative humidity. The reference copies are indexed in the Goldmine catalog of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, which can be accessed on the Web at www.uaf.edu/library.